Bubble Girl

An Irreverent Journey of Faith

KATHRYN BANAKIS
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A Note on Truthiness

The stories contained in this book are true, but some names and facts have been changed in the interest of privacy or blips in my memory. Any and all errors are my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault.
Foreword

I love it that one of my clergy friends signs her emails with this quote from Audrey Hepburn:

“I love people who make me laugh. I honestly think it’s the thing I like most, to laugh. It cures a multitude of ills. It’s probably the most important thing in a person.”

Hepburn’s quote is great in itself, but what tickles me is that it comes into my inbox from a woman of the cloth. There’s too much about religion that’s not funny—at least not in a good way.

So that’s why I’m downright delighted with Bubble Girl. And I bet you will be too. In fact, you might want to speedread the rest of this Foreword, because life is too short to put off laughter.

But if you are staying with me for a few more minutes, let me tell you a little more about why I’m so delighted with this book and with this author.

The first thing to say is that this book matters. Now I believe that Forewords to books ought to touch upon the context in which a particular book matters at a particular time, so I will say a word about that.

Kat Banakis’s book matters because it’s not just her story: it’s our story, and the story of what it means to be a person of faith (or not) at this moment in time. This is a deeply personal memoir, but one that holds up a mirror for all of us to see ourselves, in all our glory and warts. And this the story of the church, which Kat calls “a shiny, lumpy crabapple of an institution” (that’s in the line when she’s explaining why she loves the church and wants to work in it as a priest). Kat gives me hope for that crabapple.

Kat’s book matters because she dares to speak the truth (in love, of course) about what happens when one human being comes into contact
with the institution we call the church. She shows us the church, not as we have might have known it or seen it once upon a time, or as it would like to be known or seen, but rather the church as it is and as it is changing (or groaning in expectation, the apostle Paul might say) in the twenty-first century.

Kat says that we make church not for reasons of family tradition or tribal orthodoxy but because of felt need (childcare) and circumstance (new in town, need friends). She shows good church and bad church, but most importantly she shows us real church.

As a member of the “first globals” generation, Kat gives us a glimpse of what the changing church might look like in the years ahead. It’s worth the view. Kat nudges us into the change with her questions, her keen insight, her fresh wisdom, and her good humor, just at this moment in time when we all need to grasp the change in which we find ourselves.

This change, Diana Butler Bass says in her newest book Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening, (Harper, 2012) is not just about change within in the church, but change throughout the culture. Bass says that we are in the midst of a social transformation in which we see in a new generation of spiritual seekers “travelling new paths of meaning, exploring new ways to live their lives, experiencing a new sense of authenticity and wonder, and practicing new forms of community that address global concerns of human flourishing.” Kat is one of those practitioners.

Kat’s book matters to me because I spend my days working with young faith leaders who are taking a critical look at the way we do church, and imagining new ways to gather as community and tell our stories and care for one another and the planet. These young leaders of The Beatitudes Society are committed to growing new kinds of churches that are welcoming, inclusive, prayerful, engaged in the needs of the neighborhood and the needs of the global human family, and not boring. Kat tells the story of the church these leaders (along with the rest of us) have inherited, and she begins to paint the picture of the church she and her generation will create.

Now I know that lots of people aren’t interested in church—the latest Pew Research poll (July 2012) showed that a whopping 19% of Americans check “None” when asked to name their religion—but I’d be willing to wager a bet that this book might be one that a None would like. That’s because Kat tells us, with keen perception, unabashed honesty, and deep intelligence, what it’s like to be human, what it’s like to feel alone, what it’s like to be connected to someone close and Something Bigger (capitals mine, not hers.) She offers no pat answers and no TMI dirty laundry sharing, just a great conversation. It’s a conversation worth sharing. I can
imagine this book jump-starting great conversations in book clubs, youth groups, and maybe even families, especially families whose children have grown up to check “None.”

So here’s a list of delights I found in *Bubble Girl*:

- She salts her personal stories with a bit of theology, church history, and church practice, and covers topics like God, Jesus, Baptism, Sacraments, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Biblical Interpretation, and Prayer, and of course, her own wrestling with ordination. I hesitate to name such topics in the Foreword, because I don’t want to tip you off to the learning that will take place while you are laughing. Think Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart. This book is a brilliant introduction to the history and practices of Christianity.
- She gives us some fresh vocabulary for churchy things. A sacrament, for example, is “a public moment of transparency.” Not bad. Church is not St. Augustine’s “heaven full of saints and sanctity and all the sopranos singing Alleluias in key all day long” nor is it polite, pristine, and pretty. It’s “real people, trying to find community, trying our best to raise energetic children to be kind adults, trying to learn what it will mean to have a good death, singing songs off-key, enacting the sacraments, learning to forgive one another because we’re still the same people coming back together week after week after week, and in the mist of all of this, hoping to know God.” That’s the church we’re looking for.
- She describes the saints as “the ones who have gone before us, rooting for the church on earth to keep on trucking.”
- She nails pie-in-the-sky Christianity with her treatment of the “superhero” version of Jesus that sees Jesus as the “ultimate roll of duct tape to patch up creation.”
- She shows us the compassion that is at the heart of Christianity (and all the great religions of the world) in showing us a Christianity that hasn’t been capturing the headlines lately, one that looks like Jesus: daring, inclusive, enthused, welcoming, a little ragged.
- She dares to name at least one sacrament as “territorial,” but I’ll leave it to you to find out which one.
- She makes hilarious puns smack in the middle of clarifying theological commentary, and she has more fun with footnotes than should be legal, as in this declaration about good and evil: “He doesn’t vacuum us up, up, and away from them, which sometimes totally sucks because then we’re still stuck in our earthly lives.” The footnote: “Pun intended.” Or there’s her footnote on Calvin’s
doctrine of predestination: “Oh, I know Theodore Beza and others drove home double-predestination, and it really started with Augustine who waffled on it, but we both know that Calvin gets the credit historically.” Or the footnote on the Holy Spirit, aka, in Greek, parakletos: “Pear-uh-clee-tos. My divinity school’s (surprisingly competitive) soccer team was called the Pair a Cleats. Groan.”

She tells the truth about what it’s like to be a stranger in a strange place, i.e., church: she enters a church coffee hour, the new kid on the block, wishing she were Wolf Blitzer—you have to read this—and she ends up admitting that what she wants in that coffee hour is what we all want from church: “I want people to want to talk to me, to feel an intimacy with me and want to connect. Or maybe, what I really want is to be known.” Of course. Don’t we all want to be known?

That brings me to her title, Bubble Girl. Where does that come from? It comes from a place we know, but a place that I haven’t seen named so poignantly and pointedly before. It’s about that moment we don’t talk about: “I’ll make a joke that flops…or try to launch a church initiative…and a Plexiglas wall descends between me and the people I was just talking to…loneliness arrives like a quarantine vessel, and I am Bubble Girl, alone and isolated in the midst of them.” There is a Bubble Girl in all of us, and Kat has the temerity to name this, and to allow us to chuckle as we recognize what’s really real in her life and our own.

In the end, she learns that she can bring her whole self into the life of faith, and into leadership in the church, even when she is “a hot mess of mascara and snot”; she knows herself to be accepted, to be home, to find her end in her beginning. Think Tillich, or Dorothy back in Kansas, or T.S. Eliot.

Isn’t this what we all need to learn? Kat Banakis is one fine teacher, mascara, snot, and all.

The Rev. Anne S. Howard
Executive Director
The Beatitudes Society
Introduction

Like many a modern American coming of age story, this story begins with a road trip. The year was 2009, when the economy was in shambles but gas prices were still cheap. My youngest sister and I were on our way from Chicago to Northern California where a graduate student sublet apartment, replete with cast-off furniture and windows that didn’t close, awaited me.

Wait. Scratch that. I have to pick up my sister first. Okay, this story begins like many a modern American coming of age story, with a road trip. The year was 2009, when the economy was in shambles but gas prices were still cheap. I had just graduated from divinity school in New Haven, Connecticut, and was moving to Northern California. My youngest sister, still in high school, couldn’t find a summer job (see note on economy) and agreed to copilot me through the plains of Nebraska and Wyoming. So I packed up my grandmother’s twenty-year-old Honda Accord that, after three years of living on the streets of New Haven looked...like something that had spent three years living on the streets of New Haven. The hood and roof had been attacked by bionic acorns and other denting forces. The wheel openings bore rust spots. The antenna could only be raised or lowered manually. She was a great car, but not a great multi-tasker. She could accelerate, blow cool air, or play the radio—but only one at a time.

I stopped in Chicago to pick up my sister, let the car rest, and to make the obligatory visit to relatives.

So—hold on, I need to explain the why of said road trip.

This story begins, like many a modern American coming of age story, at my meeting with the bishop’s office, at which they laid out their expectations for my discernment period prior to ordination to the priesthood.
in the Episcopal Church. You know the one—that meeting after you're approved for Round One* of the ordination process, but before Round Two.** It's that big session when you meet with a representative from the bishop's ordaining committee and the bishop's staff person to find out your marching orders for the coming months and years.

Oh…right…that would only be a familiar coming of age story if it were 1809, and I were a boy, and all New England institutions of higher ed were, in fact, seminaries. Okay, so an industrial and gender revolution later, I'm sitting in the bishop's office in Connecticut, an old mansion built back in the 1800s at least, and the committee member, the bishop's staffer, my supervisor from the church where I've been interning for two years, and I are around a huge wooden table right out of Camelot. It's early January in New England. The sun is bouncing off the snow, through the stained-glass windows in the parlor.

Many people and years have led up to this meeting. Ordination in the Episcopal tradition is always a combination of a person sensing a “call” to ordained ministry and then a series of local communities publicly affirming that they sense the same direction for that person and see said person as a minister, too. First is the local congregation, then a regional body, then a whole range of people at divinity school—administrators and teachers and internship supervisors and classmates—then finally the bishop’s advisory committee, and the bishop(s). It’s a series of sound checks. Do you hear what I hear? Yep, good to proceed.

The ordination process is also regional, with each region setting its own rules and processes and clergy quota. I lived in Washington, D.C., when I began the process, but that region hit its quota and stopped accepting “newbies.” So I moved to Connecticut to both attend divinity school and establish residency at a church in the Connecticut region to start the process there. It was sort of like a political hopeful might buy a house in the next town over to be within a different ward. Now, though, I am much delayed in the process when compared to my classmates and friends from other regions and denominations. It’s right off into ordained ministry positions for many of them—the ones who stand too close in conversation and pet my arm when we talk; those who have adopted British accents and PBS costume drama attire (though they grew up in suburban Atlanta); and even the people who are late to class because they were slain by the Spirit in the cafeteria. (Hate it when that happens.)

The four of us at the knights of the round table do a quick review of all the classes I’ve taken, my internships at the church and as a chaplain at an

* Postulancy.
** Candidacy.
inner-city hospital, the seven written exams administered by the Episcopal Church, and the Shakespeare or Bible quotes quiz in which I had to say whether a quote was an aphorism from the Bard or a quote from the Good Book (a test that would have been equally appropriate for an English major or a religion major), the mental and physical tests I’ve undergone, and my extensive criminal background check.

“Well,” the bishop’s representative says brightly, “Everything seems to be in order here. We’ll have some more oral exams and periodic interviews of course, but you’re in great shape. We should be on schedule, God willing and the people consenting,* for a 2012 priesting.”**

“No sooner?” I ask.

“Now Kat,” the committee representative answers patiently, “We’ve been very clear with you about the process. This period is critical for you and us to mutually discern if ordination to the priesthood is the right thing for you.”

Really, by the Connecticut region’s rules and regs, things can’t go any faster. I know that. But there are always apocryphal stories of people being fast tracked, and maybe, just maybe, I could be one of them. No dice.

I am still disappointed. It’s like when you’re driving on the kind of highway that has hundreds of miles between exits, and you really have to go, but it’s only ten more miles and so you self-talk and avoid thinking of waterfalls until you get to the exit. Then you pull off and follow the exit road deeper and deeper into an unknown place. Minutes and meadows pass and finally you come upon a concrete slab with rusted gas pumps and a hand-lettered marquis sign that reads “$ .89/gl.” And what had been self-talk to endure the last bit becomes internal organ ache and despair.

Maybe you know something of what I was feeling. Maybe you’re familiar with the doubt around a sunken opportunity cost: three years of school and unemployment passed. You also might know what it is to be young enough that three more years feels like a very long time to pour into a career path that might not work out. Perhaps you know what it is to wonder if you’ve made a horrible mistake based on false inklings that were just an effect of an underdeveloped cerebral cortex because everyone else seems to have their act more together. You might even know the feeling of your future being in the hands of outsiders whose rubric is how they feel about you.

Short of being thrown in the express checkout for ordination, I hope that the committee might at least have some direction on what they want me to do or work on in the intervening time. To-do lists soothe me. I make

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* This is the Episcopal equivalent to the Arabic Inshallah.
** Bet you didn’t know it was a verb.
them for days off. Sometimes I even make them after I’ve already done things—just to be able to cross things off.

I shift in the large, wooden chair. I adopt my most decorous attitude. “Given what you know of my portfolio, what would the committee like to see happen in these coming years?”

The committee rep smiles back, “Well, the committee’s main concern for you, Kat, is that you’re too goal-oriented, too driven. We’d like to see you grow in ‘just being.’ Experience what it’s like to be in church and not lead worship, really live into your first vows, your baptismal covenant.”

This is even more horribly formless than my worst fear. Baptism is what the living do. In the Episcopal tradition it’s about living as a person of faith in this life. In fact, when I worked as a hospital chaplain, I wasn’t supposed to baptize stillborn babies. I did anyway, though we called it something else. I did it because baptism is what the living do and what the living must go on doing. And if that blond young father—who still kept a wrinkled high school dance picture of him and his wife, all limbs and crinoline, in his wallet—if he wanted a baptism, then I would most assuredly drip water on his daughter’s head and dedicate her to God while his wife rocked in the hospital bed holding her stomach, looking away but saying, “Keep going. I’ll want to remember this, too…some day.”

Hospital cases aside, you’ll rarely see a private baptism in the Episcopal Church because the Christian life isn’t a private affair, so our initiation rite isn’t either. The ceremony is as much about the gathered community promising to try to help raise a child (or adult convert) in the faith as it is about the parents or convert making their own intentions known. Baptism is about living as a person of faith and trying to help others do the same.
But living doesn’t follow a specific roadmap, and so the baptismal vow describes the pillars of our faith and general commitments we make to God and one another. It begins with a responsive reading of the ancient Christian creeds between the clergy person celebrating the baptism and everyone else (congregation, baptismal family, the whole gang responding).

**Celebrant:** Do you believe in God the Father?
**People:** I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

**Celebrant:** Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
**People:** I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

**Celebrant:** Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
**People:** I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Then the covenant moves into how we commit to live out our faith.

**Celebrant:** Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
**People:** I will, with God’s help.

**Celebrant:** Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
**People:** I will, with God’s help.

**Celebrant:** Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
**People:** I will, with God’s help.

**Celebrant:** Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
**People:** I will, with God’s help.
Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
People: I will, with God’s help.¹

It’s elegant and comprehensive, and yet challenging; individual and yet communal. Love it. I’m sold.

But I need something to do for three years. The woman’s suggestion that I take time to really live into my baptismal covenant was about as helpful and practical as sitting through a performance art brainstorming session on the color yellow: “We’d really like to think through what it’s like to be yellow. How does yellow sound? What is yellow? What would it be like to embody yellow? Yellow is yolk. Yolk is yellow.”

Lord almighty.

Plus, I doubt my own resolve. The Amish send their young adults out into the world for two years in what is known “rumspringa” to experience life outside the community before they make a commitment to the Amish way of life. What if, after my Vegas bender, I decided I didn’t want to work in the church? Then where would I be? Seriously in debt for a professional degree I wasn’t using.

I leave the meeting furious and frightened.

The next weekend I fly to San Francisco for a college friend’s weddings. I relay my tale of whine to other friends out there, over coffee. Outside. In January. “Well,” one shrugs in the way that Californians shrug with an air of It can’t be that bad if you’re sitting outside in January, “You could move here. The tech industry has shielded the economy a bit, and there’s rental stock, and food is cheap.”

Shazam. I can move there. A plan begins to take shape. I interview all of the clergy I respect to ask them what aspect of ministry they find most difficult or what they’d do if they had a couple years to prepare. Without fail, they say, “Finances”—fundraising, stewardship, budgeting, the works (and fundraising isn’t all that different from the work I’d done before seminary as a federal lobbyist).

Well, almost without fail. The woman assigned by the bishop’s office to be my mentor is a priest in an affluent community in southern Connecticut. Her church has recently gone through a horrible personnel issue involving a music director with child porn found on his church-issued computer. (See note on extensive background checks I must undergo every time I apply for a new job within the church.) Suffice it to say that this woman and her church had been through the wringer when the diocese assigned her as my mentor.
She answers my inquiry by staring off into space and then slowly responds, “See movies. Take vacations. Enjoy your weekends. Go out every Saturday night if you can. Get together with friends. I don’t remember the last time I did that. Once this thing goes on,” she taps her clerical collar, “it’s all…” Her voice drifts off.

If I were more of an Evangelical, I’d smile and say that one friend finding me a fundraising job at her nonprofit and another friend needing a subletter was a total God thing. But I’m not an Evangelical. So I’ll say the same thing but a little differently, which is what usually happens between Evangelicals and Episcopalians. I’ll say instead that, for some reason, God was bringing me out to a place where I didn’t have a solid sense of identity and community because I needed to fall apart a little bit and grow up a little bit. I needed to scream into the fog that rolls off the Pacific. What am I if not accomplished? What if I leave Christianity? What if no place ever feels like home? What if I always feel alone?

You know what happens. This is, after all, a good American coming of age story about a woman on the verge. The year was 2009, when the economy was in shambles but gas prices were still cheap. I was moving to California, where the best-laid plans would fall apart. Hilarity would ensue. The foreshadowing from the introduction comes true. I learn to live out my baptismal covenant.

But this is also an all-American youngish adult love story. It will end with a prom scene of sorts. In college and seminary I fell in love with theology, literally the study of God. Theology tries to break down what we can know and discover about God into a series of questions in order to explore the fullness of God. The discipline isn’t without its detractors. Many think that to try to say or codify anything about God is heresy or egotism. No theologian, though, thinks that she will capture or codify God in her proofs. Rather, the goal is to ask more and more questions to come to know and love God more.

During seminary, mine was a May/December romance between me and a bunch of dead white guys. They asked the questions I had long skirted around, but hadn’t had the context or language to ask. With them, questions of the relationship between God and life, death, good, evil, eternity, and now were all on the table, a table strewn with highlighters in the wee hours of the morning.

But after graduation, after I stopped gorging on the words of theology like a goose being fattened for foie gras, I had to begin to live theologically, integrating the questions I had come to love into the daily rhythm of bills and traffic and coworkers and kids on the playground and pouring maybe
too-old creamer into the coffee. An infatuation becomes a lived reality. Each chapter of this book considers a different doctrine of Christian theology to tell a piece of that maturing love story.

I include my love story by way of invitation. I hope that you too have the opportunity to consider and explore these old, crusty questions that have a way of keeping faith new and relevant.

But first I needed to stop in Chicago to rest my beater of a car, kiss my grandmother, and pick up my sister.

**Discussion Questions:**

- What does baptism mean to you?
- What is the role of baptism in your community?
- Have you had an experience in which it felt like other people were determining your future?
- Have you had an experience of an unwelcome delay?
I stop in to touch base with my yiayia* on the cross-country drive because that’s what you do in my family. You stop in to pay your respects to the older folks. When I was little and we lived in north Texas, we would drive from Dallas to Chicago each summer, and we would always have to visit Yiayia and her mother, Big Yiayia, in their six-flat. Big Yiayia was a force of nature who commanded attention, usually from a reclining position on the front porch, where she would complain about her ailments in a heavy Greek accent and gesture with two fingers for Yiayia to do her bidding. Get the bread. Rotate the fan. Bring me the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

I had to kiss Big Yiayia on the cheek even when she didn’t have her teeth in and black curly hairs sprouted on her chin. While my parents talked to Big Yiayia on the porch, Yiayia would let me keep whichever nail polish I liked best from the basket she kept on the bathroom floor. Old apartments—the combined smells of wood, carpet, radiators, lead paint, and cooking oil—always smell to me like Yiayia’s apartment, even my current flat. Sometimes when I pad into the bathroom between waking and sleeping, my foot instinctively moves out to kick the basket of nail polish next to the toilet.

I also stop in because I have Yiayia’s car, which she asks after, and I’m not convinced that it will make it to back to Chicago again. I was

* “Grandmother” in Greek.
scheduled to begin seminary right around the time Yiayia began to ram her sensible sedan into large, immobile objects at low speeds. My father and his brothers agreed that my driving the car out of state would be a good thing, especially when she began calling local mechanics to say that her car wouldn’t start and could they send someone to look at it. The something wrong was that her sons had disconnected the battery. Senile and sly as a fox. When the time came to actually sign the title over, she held the pen the way children hold crayons, in her fist pointing downward.

“Where are you taking my car?” she asked.

My dad stepped in. “She’s going back to school. For philosophy.” We had agreed not to tell Yiayia that I was going to seminary. It was bad enough that my parents hadn’t raised me “in the church,” meaning the Greek Orthodox Church. Instead, my Irish Catholic mother and Greek Orthodox father had raised us in Protestant churches as a happy medium. That I was going to become ordained a Protestant minister could resurrect Yiayia’s memories of when my dad married outside the fold. Yiayia was so upset at their mixed marriage that she refused to walk down the aisle at either of my parents’ wedding ceremonies. Big Yiayia had watched from her perch and mused casually that if my father had been raised properly, he never would have married outside.

As Yiayia signed the title over to me in shaky script, she said to me, “You’re just going to keep it running until I’m ready to drive again. I just need to get better glasses, but it can take a while to find a good pair.” So far it’s taken three years to find that pair of glasses.
I visit in small part because I’m preparing to be ordained clergy, and part of what we do is visit the sick and elderly and homebound. I’ve become something of a pro at listening to stories of sciatica.

But I also come because she is the only living member of my female ancestor mythology. Somewhere in my youth I started this elaborate imagination project of creating a pantheon of my foremothers based on the bits of information I knew about them—and a great deal of whimsy. All would have been grand in another time and place. They were thwarted by their circumstances of poverty and misogyny.

In my version of Yiayia’s story, she would have turned her love of literature into work as a professor if finances hadn’t required that she work in the family diner after school instead of studying. Big Yiayia forbade her from going to college and instead married her off to my affable grandfather at eighteen. But she lived out her independence in other ways. She took a job as a sales clerk in the men’s department at Marshall Field’s, and when the evil old boys’ network refused to share their retail clients, she built up a cadre of loyal customers who the old boys didn’t want: men who liked men. Yiayia’s customers asked for her by name and bought many, many fine suits.

We’re quite alike, Yiayia and I. We both love books. We both befriended nonstraight people before it was mainstream. Plus, we look alike, from the neck down—or at least we would if she hadn’t had four sons by the time she was thirty, and a traumatic brain injury that took away her mobility and her sense of being full when eating. My mother’s fair, straight haired, Northern European gene pool had nothing on my dad’s Mediterranean DNA strengthened by years in the sun and democratic debates.

But, I also come over because I love my grandmother. It is a mole sauce love—comfortable and familiar and made up of complexities and time.

Yiayia is something of a sandcastle today, beige and mounded up in her recliner. The fact that she’s there in the chair with an industrial nylon woven belt always around her middle means that she and her caregiver have already been up for many hours, making the long journey from the bed to the bathroom to the kitchen table to the chair. If her caregiver can pull at just the perfect resistance, and Yiayia can move her feet even a little bit, then the gravitational force of Yiayia-on-the-verge-of-a-faceplant moves the duo forward…provided there’s no bump in the carpet. More and more, though, Yiayia’s legs just completely give out. As soon as they get her up to standing, her legs crumble; so they use the belt to get her into a wheelchair.

She is watching *The View*. That’s good. For many years she watched soaps and could tell you the plotlines of who was having an affair with whom. But then for a while all she wanted was old cartoons. She’d laugh
every time a bomb went off in Tom’s face as Jerry scampered into a mouse hole. “He got away again!” she’d chortle. Each time.

_The View_ seems like progress. If she were here, I would kiss Barbara Walters and not mention at all that she’s starting to look a little windswept.

Yiayia’s cheek remains indented where my lips apply pressure in kissing her hello. “Hi Yiayia. It’s Kathryn your granddaughter. It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too.” She takes fifteen seconds to say this phrase, which is approximately seven times as long as it would take me to say it. Every word rumbles out in a guttural tone between long pauses. She may or may not reach the end of a phrase before becoming too tired or distracted to finish.

All thoughts and stimuli seem to have equal value to Yiayia. A person talking, a mosquito buzzing, and the garbage truck rumbling outside are equally compelling. She has no separation between foreground and background.

“You say ‘your granddaughter’ like I don’t know who you are,” she continues. She’s been known to receive a kiss from one of the granddaughters and ask accusingly, “Who are you?” So I introduce myself every time we talk.

I ask if I can turn the TV off so that we can concentrate on talking. She considers my request. Then, finally, “Yes.” I reach for the remote before she can change her mind. What were they talking about on _The View_? She says she doesn’t know.

Sometimes Yiayia can answer questions, but sometimes I have to monologue. If I happen upon the file of her history that’s open at that moment, she’ll respond, but it’s a crapshoot. I begin by telling her that my youngest sister Margo and I are going to drive cross-country in Yiayia’s old car. Margo is seventeen. Can she believe that? That Margo is seventeen?

“No?” She turns to me. I nod. She smiles. That’s the right answer. When someone asks a question that ends, _Can you believe it?_ the right answer is no.

“Do you remember when Margo was born?”

“Oh, yes. Your father called me, and he said, ‘Ma, I have something to tell you. Gayle is having a baby.’” She _does_ know who I am. She knows that my father is Chris, married to Gayle, and that my sister is Margo.

“And what did you think?”

“Fine, what did I care? They can have a baby if they want. He called from Hong Kong, you know.” _Yes, I do know. I lived with them. I was ten._

“He came back for my surgery. From Japan.” _From Hong Kong. You just said it. You know this._

“That was nice, huh?” I ask.
“Yes. He’s a nice boy. He was so nervous about me being sick. They all were.”

“Were you nervous?”

She shrugs.

“Do you remember when they told you that you had cancer?” I continue. I don’t mean to be imprudent. I’m just curious. I was young when it happened, and no one ever talks about it. There’s no one else in the room today, no baby cousin doing somersaults on the carpet or an uncle flipping through her bills to make sure everything is paid.

“Yes.”

Very, very long pause. I wait before continuing. Is she done? She’s done.

“What did you think?”

“I was having these headaches, and so I was saving up to buy some nice down pillows. I was waiting for them to go on sale at Field’s. Then I’d use my store discount, but not if they were already sold. Then I couldn’t buy them. I was saving up in case I couldn’t get them on sale.”

“And then they told you you had cancer?” I press.

“Yes.”

“And what did you think?”

“I guess I don’t need to buy pillows.” I chuckle and she just looks at me. Then, she makes the sound of laughter, but her face is blank in confusion. Brain injury is funny that way. Some aspects of decorum, like laughing when others do, remain, but she doesn’t know what was funny. She keeps laughing long after I stop.

“Where was the tumor?”

She lifts up what remains of her hair in front. She’s balding, and the hair never really grew back around the scar, so she has a comb-over on top. Before menopause and the chemo and the surgery, we had the same, curly hair. My hair went curly in high school, and my mother had no idea how you managed such things. I asked Yiayia what she did when she was younger. She shrugged, “I don’t know. Ask your mother.” Not helpful—and neither were my cousins who got straight hair. Now, her hair tufts out like Scuttle, the seagull in *The Little Mermaid* after he teases his head feathers with a fork. She’s the best indicator I have for how I will age—rounding on the bottom and thinning on the head. She pulls back the hair next to the part on the right hand side of her head and reveals a craggy scar, running somewhat parallel to her part. It’s on the right, not the left. All this time I’d been thinking that her scar was on the left, where the comb-over ended, but it’s on the right.

It’s on the right, so she can’t be what I thought, not exactly. I thought I had diagnosed Yiayia as a college freshman. I was that good. In Psych
we read about Phineas Gage, the famous construction worker who survived a railroad tie going through his skull. He was the classic example of front left lobe damage. In the pages of the introductory textbook, I thought I had discovered what ailed my grandmother.

Gage was said to have a penchant for the negative after his accident. Yiayia was living in an angry world of the past. She self-defined by every kid in the schoolyard who had called her a name or pulled her hair. Positive memories were entirely slippery, even when we described aloud her sons, her husband, her work at Field’s. Only the dull, old hurts offered a toehold to who she was. The worst offender to Yiayia was Big Yiayia, who was dead by then, though you wouldn’t know it from the way Yiayia brought her up in constant conversation. We were all subject to an endless recitation of Big Yiayia villain stories, and trying to change the direction of the conversation was futile. Big Yiayia undermined her joy at every turn. Once, I asked if Yiayia remembered anything about the days her sons were born. She shrugged and answered that Big Yiayia said she wasn’t a very good mother.

Yiayia’s brain refused to let her stay in the present. She couldn’t hold onto her siblings or children or grandchildren. It wasn’t that she forgot our names or how we fit together, but more that we weren’t very interesting to her. Big Yiayia and the pain therein had too strong a hold. If I told her about something going on in my life, she’d remark, “Oh, that’s nice, Honey,” even if it wasn’t something nice, and then her face would go sort of blank for a moment until it settled in a scowl, some familiar painful memory again at the forefront of her mind and face.

Those years of Yiayia’s life are one of my versions of hell. She couldn’t weigh her memories against one another or alongside her present reality or accomplishments. She couldn’t see her life in all its complexity of good and bad, only the unpleasant past on endless replay. It was a loop of one sorrow to the next, something yet more painful behind every door. Neither present reality nor future possibilities had any bearing.

Brain injury took away her ability to frame her life as anything other than tragedy, and it took away her ability to ask or answer the question, “Who are you?” So, in some ways, brain injury removed her ability to form relationships, because that’s what an active relationship is, asking again and again in different ways and tumbled tenses, “Who are you?” We ask it of one another and of ourselves and of God and of God about ourselves—Who are you? Who am I? Who are you in light of your past? Who are you now? These questions are what bring us back to one another time after time, to live into the mystery of life together. It’s never decided once and for all.
Yiayia’s still not able to stay present or to hold onto much new information about another person, but something has shifted in her brain so that other memories are surfacing. There are other characters and nuances in her past I’ve never heard before. Then again, I’m not sure that I’ve ever tried to ask her, just the two of us talking, who she is and was. I answered it for her in my imagination, but my answers weren’t accurate. She’s not Phineas Gage, and she’s not a twentieth-century feminist comic book heroine. She’s herself.

“How big was the tumor?” I ask her, to keep the conversation going.

“The size of a lemon, they said, before the surgery. And then they said an orange or a grapefruit once they opened it up.” She lets her hair flop down. “Sometimes oranges and grapefruits can be the same size, you know.”

My parents had used citrus descriptors when they told me Yiayia had a tumor—the size of an orange, and the surgeons had to be very careful. I pictured an osage orange, the inedible, lumpy, yellow-green fruit with a citrus smell that fell along the bike path when we lived in north Texas. The masses have a tough skin that looks, well, rather brainlike, surrounding white, sticky, oozing sap. I figured that the tumor would also leak if punctured. That’s why the surgery was so delicate.

“Did the headaches go away then after the surgery?”

“Yes…no… My head hurt different because they had to break it.” Long pause. Now she’s really done. The file for 1991–1992 is empty or stalled.

“Yiayia, do you remember what it was like to go to your father’s restaurant after school?”

“I used to know what kind of people would order what cigarettes.”

“Who would order what?” I ask.

“Oh, well, you know young women would order one thing and old men another.” Silence. I don’t know if the file for 1941 is done.

“Margo and I are leaving from here and driving all the way to California. We downloaded her summer reading list so that we can listen to it on books on tape while we go. Did you have summer reading lists when you went to high school?”

“Oak Park River Forest is a good high school. That’s why I stayed in Oak Park for the boys to go there. It was a good high school.” This is typical, that she’ll defensively answer a different question than one that was asked.

“It still is a good school. Did you ever think about moving?” She scrunches up her face and shakes her head. She stops shaking to stare at the TV, perhaps longingly.
“Do you remember what you read in high school?” She shrugs, face still scrunched. “Did you ever read *Huck Finn* in school?”

“We were supposed to, but I…I read…I got the… You know what I mean.”

“*Cliff’s Notes*?”

“No!” She shoots back.

“Okay, like an easier version?”

“Yes. Yes. At the library, the ones where it was easier to get the story.”

“Were they yellow and black?”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe they weren’t.”

“Maybe they weren’t?” She asks back.

“Maybe the easier version wasn’t yellow and black. That’s what they looked like when I was in high school, but maybe it was different for you.”

“No it was the same as you. Yellow and black. The same. Just like you.”* She nods as if to end the discussion.

“Did you like English class?” I change the topic.

“More than algebra. I failed algebra.”

She had failed algebra. Perhaps it wasn’t all Big Yiayia that kept her from college. The plot thickens. It wasn’t all outside forces and circumstance that thwarted her becoming a literature professor.

She continues, “Once I saw my algebra teacher Mr. Reardon here in the neighborhood. He was just walking, and he saw me. I think he was embarrassed to have to see me living nearby, and so he says to me, ‘I’m sorry I failed you.’ And I said, ‘It’s okay.’”

“Was it okay?”

“Yes. It was. The teacher would call you to the board to do the problems on the board. The chalkboard. And he’d say Good job, Sam. Oh, right, Ralph. He’d go down the row. I sat far back. Unless we sat by names. I didn’t want him to call on me.”

“So you didn’t raise your hand?”

“No! But he’d just call on you, and you’d have to walk up there and write out the problem. And I could write out the problem, and if it was one that looked just like the example, then I could do it, but not if they changed it.”

That’s how I passed physics and calculus: memorizing the question formats and then what the answers looked like at each step. I never

*Cliff’s Notes, it turns out, debuted in 1958, approximately fifteen years after my grandmother finished high school. It’s likely that Yiayia had an illustrated or junior edition of *Huck Finn.*
understood the underlying concepts so that I could apply them together or in any meaningful way.

Silence. Then the file clicks in again. “Everyone would sit down, and I’d be the only one standing there. I’d hold the chalk and look at the board, and everyone in the whole class would be looking at my backside. And I just stood there, not moving until the teacher would say, ‘Can you finish it, Sophia?’ And I’d say no. And then he’d say, ‘Someone go up there and help her.’ And I would sit down.”

“Were there some classes where you did know the answers?”

“No.” Silence. “Well, myths. Because we’re Greek, you know,” as if this is self-explanatory. “And when the teacher asked who is so-and-so, I raised my hand, and she said ‘Yes, Sophia?’ And I told her who he was. And then on the next one, too. And she said, ‘How do you know that?’ And I said my mother taught me.”

“She was a good teacher, huh?”

“For that. She taught me the myths when she told me stories about Greece.”

Family lore holds that when Yiayia traveled with Big Yiayia back to her little mountain village in Greece one time, Yiayia noticed things in passing that looked exactly like hers—clothing or jewelry or shoes. At first, she thought that she was projecting familiar things the way that you can when traveling—seeing familiar faces only to realize up close that they’re strangers. But after the second or third time, she confronted her mother about the fact that all of the village girls were wearing Yiayia’s own jewelry and clothes and shoes that had mysteriously gone missing from her closet. Big Yiayia waved her hand, “You didn’t even know it was gone. You don’t even miss it in America.”

“Was algebra the only class you failed?” I ask.

She laughs, and shakes her head no. Then she looks at me sadly, “I never thought that I’d be telling my granddaughter what classes I failed.”

I wish, right then, that she didn’t know who I was, that the file for who she was talking to had slammed shut in the same instance that her high school memory opened or that I hadn’t pried open the high school memory. Her failed classes were hers to keep private and buried. I want, for her sake, to go back thirty seconds, back to the power relationship of the grandmother who took her granddaughter to buy a “first day of school” dress at Marshall Field’s that was far too fancy and too expensive for school. It wasn’t even on sale. It was full price and navy blue with a white pattern and a name brand my mother never caved to. Let’s go back to there, Yiayia, not here, where I’ve probed and exposed a scar you find indecent.
Or let’s just go back to companionable silence. We can do that. I can do that. We can be quiet together, and then I won’t have flipped over this memory and be holding it, ogling, like kicking over a garden rock whose underside teems with worms and mushrooms and moss all meant for the dark; not because I think that there’s anything wrong with the algebra failure but because you do, and even now, even with who you have become, you are still my grandmother, and I love you as that. Or at least I want to.

“I haven’t been in high school in a long time. I promise not to use you as an excuse if I ever fail a class.”

She pauses and then changes files, “Do you like driving my car?”

“I do.” She looks away from me and won’t say anything.

I babble nervously, “Thank you for letting me drive it. It’s wonderful. I’ve driven the car every week to jobs and conferences for graduate school all over Connecticut and New York and Massachusetts. Your car has been to Vermont! I couldn’t have done any of that if you hadn’t let me use your car. Thank you so much.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Do you miss having your car?”

She turns back to face me, “I see all of these commercials every day on the TV for cars, and I just think…”

File stall. I am about to fill in when the doorbell rings, and my aunt arrives. The conversation is over.

She is so much more complex than I made her out to be. She is now confined to The View as her window to the world, but remembers some measure of being able to get up and go when she wanted to in that beater of a sedan. She remembers giving it away. She was mortified in algebra.

She answers the question “Who are you?” differently now than she could have a few years ago in the angry era. But then, wouldn’t we all? Isn’t self-definition the project always under construction, as our circumstances and experiences change us?

The question “who are you” is living and critical to my relationship with God and others and myself. That I think of the question in the present tense puts me at odds in some ways with two historically significant (and largely Protestant) Christian tenets: double predestination and free will.

Double predestination (at the risk of gross over-simplification) says that from the beginning of time God decided that some folks would be saved and others would not. No matter what, a person’s fate was sealed from the beginning of time, from before she was born, and that person couldn’t do anything about it. Life on earth was something of a mirage. People might think they had control over what they did and believed, but
really God had chosen who would go to heaven and who would go to hell before anyone’s birth.*

Northern European Reform theologian John Calvin is credited** with bringing double predestination to the forefront of theology. He explained the concept of double predestination when he wrote, “For all are not created in equal condition; but eternal life is foreordained for some and eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any person has been directed to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him or her as predestined to life or death.” Calvin concedes that the concept raises “some major and difficult questions.”

You don’t say. Like maybe that some of us are predestined to eternal death and suffering before we are even born, no matter what we do and become in our lives? Or, how could a good and loving God create a baby predestined for eternal death and suffering? Or, why create a beautiful humanity in a fascinating world that’s just a *Truman Show* where a tragic script has already been written out?

A second, even more popular tenet in Christian history is free will, or rather, “free-ish will.” “Free will” in broad terms assumes that a person is free to chose and make her relationship with God and others over time and throughout time. There’s no binding contract. But in the (mostly) Evangelical Protestant construct, “free will,” connotes a situation in which a person is free to choose Christ (usually through baptism or some other conversion experience), but that choice is singular and permanent and indelible and will be acknowledged at a future judgment day. Whatever happened in one’s life before the choice for Christ and whatever happens after is washed away by the decision of that moment of choosing Christ. A person is sealed in the courts of heaven. Though a person is expected to live in holiness, the proverbial deed has been signed. Hence, I think of it as “free-ish will” because there are significant limitations on the freedom of the will.

I love the reassurance in free-ish will that nothing a person can do will separate her from the love of God, but not the idea that all of what matters rests on one choice at one point in time. We live in constant movement and countless decisions. Some decisions have greater impact than others, but all of them shape our lives with God and one another in this world.

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* Not to be confused with Single Predestination in which God deems all of humanity good and saved no matter what.
** Oh, I know Theodore Beza and others drove home double-predestination, and it really started with Augustine who waffled on it, but we both know that Calvin gets the credit historically. And it’s a great quote.
I can accept that both double predestination and free-ish will assume that we are moving towards some end point. In Chapter 13 I go into great detail about how maybe we’re all moving to some creative, wonderful, yet unknown end in which we will be known and judged before God and one another. What I balk at in both doctrines is the idea that our present and ongoing choices and lives don’t matter. Both double predestination and free-ish will force our experience of life on earth into a situation in which who we are and most of what we do are irrelevant. In double predestination, God has already definitively decided who is damned. In free-ish will a person decides once to choose God or not, and that’s that. If you make the right choice, all before and after is forgiven. If you never make the choice, sucks to be you.

If my relationship with God is a continual one throughout my life, as I hope it is, then who I am and what choices I make and how I frame my history are always in the present tense. This is my real life. I recreate my who-ness with God right now…and now…and even now. I will continue to do so even as I move towards a final, fascinating end.

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A few weeks after our visit, I call Yiayia after driving her car over the Golden Gate Bridge. “Hi, Yiayia. It’s Kathryn your granddaughter.” Nothing. “I wanted to tell you that I drove your car all the way from Chicago to California, and I just drove over the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Kathryn. Your granddaughter.”

“Why are you calling me? This is my home phone number.”

“Yiayia, it’s Kathryn. I came to visit a few weeks ago and we talked for a long time. Do you remember that?”

“Who? Yes?”

“Well, I just wanted you to know that I got out to California okay.”

“Oh.” A laugh track rumbles behind her.

“Yiayia, should I let you go?”

“Go where?”

“I mean, is this not a good time to talk? Should I let you go back to what you were doing before I called?”

“Yes. I…think…I think you should let me go.”

“Okay. I love you, Yiayia.”

“I love you too. Bye.” The words come out at normal speed and coherence. Something ingrained still tells her voice how the words fit together as
a phrase. The phone beeps in different tones into my ear as she hits several different buttons before her fingers find “off.”

**Discussion Questions:**

- What, if any, has been your experience with someone whose personality changed because of illness or injury? Did it change who they were?
- How much choice do you think that you have in terms of your present? Your future?
- What do you think about the idea that God has already determined a destiny for people?
- The author argues that the primary question we ask of ourselves, one another, and God is “Who are you?” Do you agree? Why or why not?